The Half Cooked Brain Chop

Sreejith Kalandy

At Sovabazar, in the early mornings of Durga Puja, to outwit the crush, we would make for the *rajbari*, the old mansion where the goddess still arrives in the old manner. Raja Nabakrishna Deb's Sovabazar Rajbari carries a whole archaeology of accommodation. The raja who threw a party after Clive's victory at Plassey, where animals were sacrificed and wine flowed and women danced, yet remained orthodox in his domestic rituals, his gods and rites untouched while keeping his ledgers open to empire. It was the comprador nature of colonial elites, holding two worlds without letting them touch, a word I first encountered with its full weight in Suniti Kumar Ghosh's work on the Indian bourgeoisie, read in Malayalam translation during my M.A. days many years ago.

This time, arriving by Metro, my destination was somewhere else, Mitra Cafe, that institution with its blackened walls and century long indifference to décor. I ordered the brain chop, the thing the place was most famous for, but something raw lay inside it that put me off, and I left it half eaten.

Once outside, I lit a cigarette. In the distance, the lanes around Sonagachi were gradually coming alive, young and not so young women waiting there, their lipstick and flashy clothes a harsh contrast to the colourlessness of the lane. None of them, one felt certain, had arrived there by choice.

There must be refugees among them, I thought. I remembered Krishan Chander’s searing letter to the prime ministers of India and Pakistan, written amid the wreckage of Partition, about the women abducted and traded across borders, their bodies becoming the terrain upon which two newborn nations enacted their hatred of one another. Some of them, one imagines, must have found their way to lanes not unlike these.

I remembered too the final scene of *Subarnarekha*, the man from a refugee family, East Bengal buried deep in his bones, entering a brothel only to discover there his half-sister. And she, in that moment of absolute ruin, ends her life with brutal finality, as though the long scream of Partition had finally, after all those years of wandering, arrived at its destination.

Refugees were Ghatak's wound that never closed. In film after film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara, Komal Gandhar, Subarnarekha*, there are refugee colonies, compromised women, displaced men carrying East Bengal in their mouths like a stone they cannot spit out.

Ghatak saw the soul of the city beyond its horrors in ways many others could not, including my relatives who come visiting and, after seeing the splendour of cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad, leave disappointed. So too Louis Malle, who came here in the late sixties and made a documentary of little more than two hours, poverty and crowds and dust and bodies dying on pavements. He could not see, or did not choose to see, what the city had absorbed. The Partition of 1947 did not merely separate a country. It sent millions across a border that had not existed the week before. They came in waves, in 1947, 1950, and 1971, with nothing, built squatter colonies from tin and tarpaulin, and refused to die. Calcutta was not poor because it failed. It

was poor because it bore something no city should have been asked to bear alone. That pain runs through Ghatak's films.

In his last film, the semi-autobiographical *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*, Ghatak plays himself, more or less, a man wandering the streets of Calcutta with a bottle of country liquor in his *jhola.* Lucid and broken simultaneously, he was a man who understood more than he could carry.

Of the great Bengali triumvirate, Mrinal Sen, Satyajit Ray, Ghatak, I return to Ghatak most. Mrinal Sen's films are overtly political, aligned to the left with the conviction of the doctrinaire. Ray is the Renaissance man, cerebral and prolific, moving effortlessly from art to music to literature to the detective stories of Feluda, continuing the literary inheritance of his immensely creative family. Both are indispensable.

But Ghatak, with fewer films, some not wholly realized, some unfinished, and a life cut short by the drinking that killed him at fifty, is the one who undoes me. Who can forget the cry of the long-suffering sister at the TB sanatorium in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, “Dada, ami bachte chaai.” I first heard it at a film festival in Kozhikode in the early nineties run by *Odessa*, the collective begun by John Abraham, himself a Ghatak disciple from FTII.

Abraham, like his mentor, died around the same age, falling from a rooftop while drinking with friends not long after completing *Amma Ariyan*, crowd sourced, shot with amateurs, a documentary fever dream of struggles and solidarity. A film that moves like a political elegy, carrying news of a dead comrade across Kerala, gathering fragments of memory and disillusionment along the way. Four decades later, news comes from Cannes Film Festival that a restored print is being screened.

On my way back, I hailed a yellow taxi, those Hindustan Ambassadors that once filled every road in childhood now fast disappearing from Calcutta. After liberalisation the streets filled with a hundred other makes, but the yellow taxi had held out, stubborn as an old habit. Now, with Uber and Ola and its inability to meet modern traffic demands, it is going the way of many beloved things. Sitting in its worn interior, I thought of *Ajantrik*, whose taxi driver forms his deepest attachment to an ageing Chevrolet taxi but, when no repair can save it, finally sells it for scrap.

As the taxi sped along, I closed my eyes, and there whizzed past in my mind a half-cooked brain chop and the unfulfilled dreams of two geniuses who burned bright and brief, leaving behind only the films that survived them, flickering still on screens in Kozhikode and Cannes and wherever the restless and the bereft gather to watch.

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Sreejith Kalandy is based in Kolkata, and writes on history, society and culture.